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Hog Creek Review

Wordsworth's Influence on Anne Brontë: Finding a Daffodil Among the Bluebells

The Brontë sisters and their literature have been studied for decades. Critics have considered each sibling, their lives, their novels, and even their poetry. Much is said about Charlotte, and even Emily, but what of Anne? Very little is said of this youngest Brontë sister, and even less about her poetry – beautiful poems such as "The Bluebell" are for the most part overlooked, and begging a second glance. Of the little discussion available, most just ponder the inspiration for the poem. Derek Stanford, a great advocate of Anne's literary excellence, is one of the few critics of Anne's poetry. In his book *Anne Brontë, Her Life and Work*, Stanford claims that Anne's poetry is principally autobiographical, and that her poems possess the power of "reflective imagination" (Stanford 168). This quality, this technique of first "recollecting" then "assessing" the past, sets Anne apart from her siblings, and establishes a reflective and evaluative tone. In *Selected Poems: The Brontës*, Juliet Barker provides some information about this poem, "The Bluebell," discussing the possible autobiographical quality of the poem in association with Anne's stay at Thorp Green. Yet in her more complete study of the family in *The Brontës*, Barker admits that although the accepted opinion is that this poem is autobiographical, she also claims it to be potentially Gondal-inspired, which would tie in with a similar poem by Emily with the same title. While each of these critics has valid points in the argument, they overlook a possible source of inspiration altogether – the poetry and works of the great Romantic, William Wordsworth. Studies have connected Wordsworth's name and works with many famous Victorian writers, the Brontë siblings included, save for Anne. The Victorian response to Wordsworth's fame and his writing is strong, including Anne Brontë's work and this poem especially. This influence onto Anne's writing is exemplified through her poem "The Bluebell," an eerie reminder of William Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." Indeed, through examining these two poems in tandem, one can easily identify the strong response Anne Brontë had to a predecessor, and better understand her work in general by recognizing a true source of inspiration.

Central to Anne's poem, nature breathes in "The Bluebell" and takes on a life of its own. In his article "Religion, Nature and Art in the Work of Anne Brontë," Edward Chitham sees nature as a common theme in Anne's literature, often tied with religion. He asserts that her spirituality, something she is famously known for, is "enhanced by a Wordsworthian approach to the natural world" (Chitham 136). Although less about religion, this poem takes on nature in a way very reminiscent of Wordsworth and his poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." Nature, for Wordsworth and his Romantic contemporaries, was a source of bliss, joy and inspiration, and this poem is full of exaltation and reverence for the natural world. This poem paints the most beautiful picture of a quiet walk outside, and all but gushes with joy and praise for the trees, the hills, the flowers. The speaker wanders, happening upon vales, long expansive valleys, and hills, bringing to mind a rolling landscape of unmeasured land. It is spontaneous, even accidental, and certainly carefree. From here the speaker and the reader travel next to a lake, and underneath trees to see the waves "dance" and "sparkle." Nature is very much alive, even acting like a person: leaping, skipping, hopping, even gliding, usually to, as dancing is defined, "accompanied music" (OED). Certainly Wordsworth, surrounded by such active and joyful nature, might have heard music, perhaps through the breeze that played through the air. But Wordsworth doesn't stop with the beauties on earth – his wandering takes him higher. He begins the poem comparing himself to a cloud, above vales and hills. The speaker becomes the white, untouchable puff in the sky, before coming back to visit the daffodils. He becomes further immersed in the sublime as he ponders the stars of the Milky Way, and likens them to the overwhelming span of flowers. Beyond the wonders of nature on earth, Wordsworth touches on the amazements outside human limits, and celebrates both. The overall effect is intoxicating, and the reader feels the ecstasy and joy just as the writer did when visiting the outdoors, reveling in the happiness nature inspires.

Anne Brontë's poem, although not as extensively, takes the reader to a place akin to that of Wordsworth's landscape. While we see Wordsworth "wandering" and "floating" like a cloud, we see the speaker in Brontë's poem "carelessly straying" with "wandering glances" (lines 14, 26). Both Wordsworth and Brontë are moving "without control or direction," roaming idly, restlessly (OED), and adopting the same impulsive and unplanned attitude to explore, to find, to discover nature. As a result of her straying, the speaker moves along a sun-washed road and finds herself between two banks, surrounded by a hill and the sea, almost identical to Wordsworth's magical valley except for his overabundance of dancing nature. Brontë, too, gives her nature human life, as she sees "smiling" flowers presenting their many colors on the banks of the sea. She further limits herself by maintaining earthbound while Wordsworth soared into the sky and higher, likening the happy flowers to the stars that "shine" and "twinkle on the Milky Way" (lines 7, 8). Rather than joining the

celestial bodies beyond her reach, she is confined to the road, and yet is still able to appreciate the sun above, that makes the day "Bright" and illuminates the path she follows. Brontë pushes her limits as far as they can go, with a brilliant sun and even a "lofty hill" (line 17), and still relishes the wonders of nature at her level.

The similarities between the two landscapes are too strong to ignore – it could even be said that they are actually two descriptions of the same setting. In Anne Brontë's poem, she has re-created Wordsworth's famous setting with her own words. The "vales and hills" are there from Wordsworth's poem, as well as the "lake," or sea. And just like Wordsworth, Brontë includes a group of "smiling flowers" (line 15), a sure reference to the "host" of happy daffodils her predecessor so admired. Perhaps in this magical place, if Wordsworth had only looked a little longer, he would have happened upon a solitary bluebell, or perhaps to him it would have been too overshadowed to be of notice. Yet with the power of these similarities, it is not out of the question to suggest that Brontë re-created this scene with her own individual outcome.

By looking at the landscapes and descriptions of the settings alone, one is able to see Anne Brontë's response to Wordsworth, both the parallels and the departures. The scenery is overwhelmingly similar, possibly the same, and it becomes all too easy to imagine this youngest Brontë sister, sitting reading Wordsworth's poetry as a girl. Several critics recognize the possible influence of Wordsworth on the other Brontë writers. Stephen Gill, author of *Wordsworth and the Victorians*, sees this Romantic poet as a great influence to Victorian literature and poetry, and even mentions Charlotte Brontë as one who refers to Wordsworth. Gill "acknowledges largely his [Wordsworth's] significance," yet he asserts that Wordsworth did not "shape" the work of the Victorian writers (Gill 116). So early into a comparison between these two writers and it becomes clear this is true: Anne Brontë's poem "The Bluebell" was certainly influenced by the work of Wordsworth, but not entirely shaped. She contains the overwhelmingly alive nature, allowing it to smile rather than dance, and chooses to keep both her feet firmly on the ground rather than flying into the atmosphere. With the landscape alone, Brontë reveals a true influence to her writing, while also asserting herself as her own writer and poet.

The flowers themselves in each poem hold great importance; they are powerful, beautiful, and arouse strong emotions for the speakers, as well as for the readers. While each poem handles the flowers differently, with different descriptions and attitudes, the strong influence of Wordsworth becomes even more obvious through further comparison of the poems. A nature-lover through and through, Wordsworth can only find joy in the daffodils. The daffodil, its blossom upturned and reaching to the sky, is a physical manifestation of the uncontrollable ecstasy and emotion Wordsworth and his contemporaries are known for. It is open, willing, and accepting of anything. And while one on its own conveys this,

Wordsworth has hundreds. More than just a grouping, he identifies a whole "host" of daffodils (line 4), making the best use of a hyperbole, comparing the multitude of blossoms to the numerous stars in the galaxy, extending in a "never-ending line" (line 9). He is overwhelmed by the number of blooms, and cannot "but be gay" when among such a "jocund," or cheerful crowd (lines 15, 16). Wordsworth feels only intense happiness from the group of daffodils when among them and remembering, and celebrates his extensive emotion, his "bliss" and "pleasure" while also celebrating this happy gift from nature (lines 22, 23).

Anne Brontë, for her flower, chose a bluebell. Many critics and scholars have the common belief that Anne wrote this poem with a harebell flower in mind, rather than a bluebell. Similar in appearance and easy to mistake, the harebell and bluebell both have blossoms different than the daffodil, arching downward rather than up, with a curved spine of a stem, the bloom opening to the ground. Right away, just from the choice of flower, the reader can sense Anne's limitations, more control than Wordsworth employed. Where daffodils are large and noticeable blooms, the bluebell is small, fragile and could be easily discounted in a large field, especially by such bright flowers as daffodils. While this blossom may have a "fine" spirit, it is "subtle" too – understated and delicate, yet powerful all the same (line 1).

Beyond appearances, Brontë limits herself to a single flower, a stark comparison to Wordsworth's hundreds of blooms. While a limit, Brontë goes on to give that "lone flower" inexpressible power (line 33). She begins her poem praising its ability to instill a "bliss" within her heart "that words could never tell" (lines 7, 8). Nothing she could say or write could describe or match the delight a single bluebell, and indeed nature, brings to her soul, a truly and utterly Wordsworthian ideal. This juxtaposition of one flower to thousands finds its base in nature. Even with a single bulb, daffodils grow up in clusters and spread. They are never alone, and are always companioned whereas the bluebell, like in Brontë's poem, can stand alone. Rather than the showy choice of a daffodil, Brontë picked a less conspicuous flower, one that mirrored her own personality. The bluebell, with downward bloom, seems almost submissive, meek, and even dutiful. As a woman, Anne would have been expected to be passive, acquiescent, even obedient. She and her sisters even changed their names in the attempt to get their novels published, opting for male names rather than their own female. Also, Anne and her family lived almost secluded, isolated in a way, and as a single, very religious woman, this meek and compliant flower would be something she could relate to, rather than the frivolous and impractical daffodils. These limitations Anne Brontë imposed, then, become even more obvious and to a point, more understandable, and reveal even more the undeniable influence of William Wordsworth.

Brontë continues with the poem, glossing over those pleasant feelings, and accusing the bluebell of inspiring grief and sadness as well as happiness. She leaves present tense and shifts to the past when remembering a time of "toil and strife" (line 44). During this time, she witnessed the solitary bluebell, and it recalled to her "sunny days of merriment" as a child, when her "heart and soul were free" (lines 37, 38). Although an enjoyable memory, it made her current state seem worse, and because of the little flower, she became embittered, and cried "burning drops" of tears, enflamed with grief (line 31). Brontë even allows the bluebell to speak, saying "Sad wanderer, weep those blissful times / That never may return!" (lines 45-46). The speaker mourns from the words and the effects of the bluebell, in addition to her previous feelings of happiness and delight. Here again, one can notice Brontë's departure from Wordsworth's previous ultimate bliss. She changes the flower, and uses only one as her muse, and further still, discovers the positive and negative feelings inside herself as she writes about this bluebell in nature. Brontë's flower poem takes on a slightly darker tone, allowing the reader to experience sadness from nature as well as ecstasy. This choice could be attributed to many things; perhaps Anne's life with the Robinson family at Thorp Green was less than pleasant. Perhaps, too, this poem was meant as a continuation of the Gondal saga. But regardless, this poem, with its similarities and differences from "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," is beyond a doubt a direct response of Anne Brontë to a much admired poet, William Wordsworth. The sameness of the setting and even the divergence with the flowers prove Wordsworth as a definite influence for Anne Brontë, one that she adapted as well as rejected.

The issue of memory, imagination, and reality become essential to both poems, and prove yet again the connection between them. The poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" ends with Wordsworth losing himself in memory, revisiting the field and "dancing with the daffodils" in his imagination (line 24). The readers, likewise, find themselves caught up in this imaginary other-world, filled with pleasure amid the crowd of dancing yellow flowers. Wordsworth takes himself and his readers into the speaker's imagination, unbound by reason or reality, and successfully allows them to feel the bliss, the emotion, the power of nature as he experiences it.

Anne Brontë, in contrast, attempts to lose her readers in memory and imagination and to keep them mourning the anxiety and strife of life. She immerses the readers in ten stanzas of memory, ending the poem without giving them an exit into the present, instilling dread and despair upon the audience. If the façade held, the reader would finish in sorrow, scorning the power of nature, and fully abandoning the frivolity of paradise in a flower. It is the strength and beauty of the first few stanzas, the confident faith in the "sweet feeling" of the bluebell, that stays with the reader (line 3). The bluebell has a spirit, a life, God-given breath and articulacy that deliver bliss straight to the heart. Like the intensity of the bliss

from the daffodil in Wordsworth's poem, the fair and clever spirit of the bluebell inspires too strong a feeling to overlook. The bluebell, although not actively "dancing" and "fluttering" like a daffodil (Wordsworth line 6), possesses a "silent eloquence" (line 5). Without even uttering a word, this tiny flower is fluent in expressing thought, and evidently more than capable of breathing joy and bliss into the world. In a dismissive gesture, Brontë attempts to overthrow the complete ecstasy of Wordsworth's daffodils, and yet only manages to adopt the utter joy of nature in her poem, showing that there are some influences from this predecessor that Anne cannot eliminate.

Anne Brontë applies many of the same ideas as Wordsworth in her poem, while also departing from his example and exploring the possibilities of creating something different. Both "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" and "The Bluebell" consider the issue of solitude, and yet Brontë takes a completely different stance than Wordsworth, diverting away from the previous opinion. The speaker in Wordsworth's poem revels in his solitude; he is "gay" with only flowers for company and delights in the happy, "jocund" assembly. Surpassing this joy, the speaker achieves a complete "bliss of solitude" (line 22) when later remembering the daffodils, and his "heart with pleasure fills" (line 23). The speaker is alone, and loving it, with the help of the happy daffodils. Brontë's speaker experiences bliss as well, but from an entirely different source. It is the "wild bluebell" that "fills my [the speaker's] heart with bliss" (lines 6, 7), not solitude. The speaker's previous "sunny days of merriment" in the company of "kindred hearts" were "blissful times" (line 45), and she longs for that companionship while feeling lonesome as a bluebell "mid heartless crowds" (line 41). She is isolated even in a crowd, just as the bluebell is singular among the daffodils, and finds no joy in this solitude. Brontë intentionally gave solitude this negative connotation, a complete change from Wordsworth's "bliss," giving her readers her own take on seclusion and loneliness. The speaker's true bliss comes from the fellowship of those that "love" and "care" for her, showing her preference to relationships and companions, rather than solitude. This emphasis on relationships is undoubtedly a real opinion of Anne's. A quiet girl who preferred to be home with family, Anne enjoyed her time with her siblings, especially her "childhood hours," and would understandably wish for companionship instead of complete isolation. Because of Anne Brontë's personal experience, she relates to the quiet and private bluebell, dismissing Wordsworth's excitement for seclusion and wishing for some company in a lonely field.

The Brontë family is known for their sheer brilliance and timeless stories, not to mention their beautiful and haunting poetry. Anne Brontë, the youngest, is no exception. Most often recognized for her devout spirit, Anne is also the author of some incredible nature poetry including "The Bluebell." Some argue the influence for this poem, saying it is a direct autobiographical reference to events in Anne's life. Others refute this, distinguishing

the Gondal aspects of the poem and putting in this category of imaginative poems. Beyond each of these assertions, however, a potentially greater influence is from the great Romantic writer William Wordsworth. In *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës*, it is said outright that "Wordsworth's nature poetry…influenced the Brontës' visual arts and writings" (Taylor 551). This claim is not unfounded, especially when considering Anne's "The Bluebell" alongside Wordsworth's famous "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." The uncanny similarities of the two can only lead readers to the knowledge that Anne read and responded to Wordsworth and even this poem in particular when writing about the power of a single bluebell. With the likenesses too convincing to ignore, readers can witness for themselves the different ways Anne Brontë assumed Wordsworth's opinions, as well as the few ways she rejected his attitudes. The ways in which Brontë adapts to Wordsworth are powerful, making the differences even more so. The limits she imposes in her poetry, the choice of a submissive flower, and even her speaker's desire for company prove Brontë to be a powerful poet, able to take a Romantic masterpiece and make it her own. By recognizing Brontë's acceptances and refusals, one can better understand her work and its influences, and even gain insights into the way some Victorians responded to Romantic literature. Anne Brontë's reaction to William Wordsworth is sound, revealing not only a little about herself and her influences, but also about the effects of the Romantics on the dutiful and limited Victorians.

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